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Every ethnographer is a Borat but is every Borat an ethnographer?

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1.0 Introduction

I am an academic, or better my identity is often ascribed by others as that of an academic. More specifically, according to which conference I will be attending, my academic identity is ascribed as that of a sociolinguist, of an anthropologist, of an anthropologist interested in linguistics or, in the best of cases, as a linguist ethnographer. In short, if I were to provide a description of my inhabited (academic) identity, I am a primary school teacher who has bumped into anthropology and sociolinguistics and who has tried to bake something out of these two disciplines. In so doing, I have become an ethnographer interested in how people construct their identities in verbal interaction within a sociocultural space, like a multicultural primary school classroom (Spotti 2007, 2008, 2009). Setting this aside, this ascribed *homo academicus* identity of mine is in sharp contrast with the fact that my inhabited identity is of someone who is well into low cultural activities like going to the pub, cheering for a football team and, as many of you, although either it does not suit the ascribed identity that has been impinged upon you or you will be shy to admit it, I am well into low key TV programs like Borat. It is while watching one of episode of this series that I came to think that Borat has got quite a bit to do with ethnography. How so? Let me bring some enlightenment to those of you who do not know Borat first. Borat is a foreigner from Kazakhstan. More precisely, he is a foreigner who has lawfully entered the United States of America and who tries to understand what is living in America all about. And in so doing, Alike Borat, in fact, the ethnographer's goal involves:

'analyzing a cultural phenomenon from the perspective of the outsider (to whom it is strange) while seeking to understand it from the perspective of an insider (to whom it is familiar)' (Gal 2005:349)

In short, it is the ethnographer's job to reflect light on phenomena that members of a culture overlook because they are taken as a given, and often explained with the metapragmatic rationale that 'that thing happens here because it is normal for it to happen like that'. Borat, alike an ethnographer, is trying to grasp the cultural ecology of the sociocultural space that he is inhabiting. In what follows, I try to tease apart what makes ethnographic research ethnographic and to draw a line between Borat's own experience and the job the ethnographer is putting up with. I then conclude with some considerations about where ethnography is heading to

2.0 When is ethnography actually ethnographic?

Ethnography is like the new girl in town. All sorts of disciplines try to have a date with her. Take for instance the fact that ethnography has had a recent hit in a handbook of criminology, it shows that at times this dating leads to a proficuous mating. Yet again ethnography finds its most suited bed fellow in anthropology. As you know, ethnography means 'writing about the nations', with 'graphy' from the Greek 'to write' and 'ethno' from the Greek noun *ethnos* that can be translated with either 'nation' or 'tribe' or 'people'. What this implies is that the unit of analysis of the ethnographer, that is the *ethnos* need not to be a nation, a region, a village or a speech community – no matter how difficult this concept may be to define – rather, to the ethnographer its unit of analysis need to be 'any social network forming a corporate entity in which social relations are regulated by customs'(Erickson 1984:52). What makes a study ethnographic, is then not the fact that this discipline takes a socio-cultural space of any size at any given time as a whole. Rather, ethnography portrays incidents through an emic perspective. This means that ethnography and the ethnographer, although we will tackle this matter at a latter stage in greater detail, he portrays events from the points of view of the actors involved. This focus on meaning constructed by the actors involved in the observed incident is at the heart of Malinowski's definition of ethnography in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. His attempt, in fact, was an attempt that although it was not always successful, it tried to reify meaning in words from the actors' perspective. But so, where does the difference between Borat and the ethnographer lay? Let's say that what Borat does is not ethnography, or better it could be addressed as a pre-scientific ethnography. Unlike Borat, the trained ethnographer brings to the field a specific concern for meaning making at the level of actors. Borat might have indeed in the end be an excellent reporter of his own experience in the United States. It may also highlight several metonymic features of the socio-cultural spaces he has been getting involved with in the search for living in America, and Pamela Anderson is unfortunately one of them. Yet again, the ethnographer combines on the ground experience with an awareness gathered through meticulous fieldwork of local meanings of behaviour that are other of his own. That is the ethnographer's *magnus opus* and yet is cross. To make sense of a 'strange' behaviour, make it familiar and then reporting on it and by doing so, making it interesting again. Thus ethnography differs from a journalistic report, a tourist diary, or an episode of Borat's series in that it becomes painstaking in its data collection, rigid in its data analysis and controlled in the ethnographer's own subjectivity. In the end is the ethnographer that gives way to a reality through his text and it is in this very text that the ethnographer produces a caricature, that is a systematic distortion of the features of a certain socio-cultural space. A distortion that does not go for subjectivity and intuition at the expenses of objectivity. Rather such distortion is a representation where the ethnographer selectively reports on certain aspects rather than others in his metonymic description of a socio-cultural space and where, like a caricature he is rendering local meaning from a chosen point of view. And in so doing, an ethnographic study becomes ethnographic in that it shows the decisions – whether incidental or else – made during the data collection process (Bezemer 2003:[?]-[?]; Jie Dong 2009:[?]-[?]; Spotti 2007:[?]-[?]), descriptions of the kinds and amounts of data that were and were not (made) available, of the negotiation of his entrance within a certain socio-cultural space, and be aware of his critical position as he renders actors' meanings in a text.

3.0 Where is ethnography heading to?

A fundamental starting point of ethnographic research, and hopefully this shows already from my argument here, is that its research object are human subjects ('the ethnographees'). In ethnographic oriented fieldwork, therefore, theory does not emerge behind a desk, but in the field. Ethnographic theorising is dialectically constructed in interaction with the material world and in encounters with human subjects. Ethnographers approach the world as an incredibly complex place of social action and communicative practice, and theorise on the basis of a description of that complexity, rather than on the basis of existing theories (See Juffermans 200[?] for a comprehensive discussion about the difference between ethnographers and tourists). Ethnographers in other words arrive at theory *from below*, that is from messy everyday life of a given sociocultural space and try to reconstruct its cultural ecology. Ethnography thus works its way up from small, micro-events and lived experiences to explain, or at least try to explain, the societal forces that are at stake within the cultural ecology of a given space at a given time. As ethnographers we arrive at new forms of knowledge in collaboration and negotiation with agentive ethnographees, or not at all (cf. Cameron et al. 1992; Collins 1998; Hodge and Jones 2000). These ethnographees, our research subjects, are not passive researchees, but agentive human beings with an attitude towards the research object and, as I have hopefully already pointed out to you, with a voice of their own (Fabian 2001).

Ethnographic studies of language in society have recently known a 'human turn'. That is, they have known a move away from languages as linguistic systems that are merely used by people, toward language as a sociolinguistic system that is constructed and inhabited by people. Prominent scholars of language in society (e.g., Rampton 1995; Stroud 2003; Blommaert 2005; Jacquemet 2005; Shohamy 2006; Makoni and Pennycook 2007; Jørgensen 2008; Juffermans 2010) no longer define the field of sociolinguistics as the study of 'who speaks (or writes) what language (or what language variety) to whom, and when and to what end' (see Fishman 1972; Extra & Gorter 200[?]), but as the study of who uses what linguistic features under particular circumstances in a particular place and time. The central question for the discipline thus shifts from 'what languages?' (with language in plural) to 'who languages which bit of a language and how does he or she does that with what purpose' (using languages as a verb). In such a sociolinguistics of *linguaging* (as opposed to a sociolinguistics of *languages*), the analysis revolves around human beings (*linguagers*) engaged in particular communicative activities and situated in particular social, historical and geographical environments. The task for such a linguistic ethnography is not only describing and understanding language, but ultimately in describing and understanding society. Will ethnography survive this challenge and the challenge brought by the languaging that takes place among people through social media? It is early days still, but it seems that linguistic ethnography is getting there.

Bibliography